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SUBJECT: FIRST GVN OFFICIAL OUTREACH TO UNOFFICIAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS

REF: HCMC 559 AND PREVIOUS; B) 05 HCMC 1082; C) HANOI 1232

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On May 30 in HCMC, the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) held its first briefing on Vietnam's legal framework on religion to encourage unrecognized religious groups to legalize their status. Over 100 representatives attended from unregistered religious organizations, including Protestant house church leaders. According to participants, CRA officials promised to approve quickly the long-pending registration application of the United World Mission Church as well as of the Baha'i church and two small independent Buddhist sects. Baptist leaders told us that they would now begin the registration process. Other Protestant house church leaders belonging to the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, welcomed the CRA outreach and acknowledged improvement in conditions for their house churches, but remain undecided on moving forward with registration. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 30, the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) held a briefing in HCMC for unrecognized religious organizations from throughout the southern half of Vietnam on the legal framework on religion. According to Tran Ngoc Bao, Vice Chairman of HCMC CRA, about 100 representatives from Protestant house churches and other unregistered religious groups, including the Baha'i, and Buddhist sects, attended. Central-level CRA Vice-Chairman Nguyen Thanh Xuan, Protestant Affairs Chief Nguyen Huy Thong, and legal department staff chaired the meeting.

¶3. (SBU) Bao told us the event marked the first official meeting with unrecognized religious groups on the new legal framework on religion. The CRA gave the participants three forms that groups must complete to apply for national-level registration, two for national-level registration (an application form and an addendum to list of member churches in each province) and a third for recognition under Vietnam's legal framework on religion.

¶4. (SBU) Bao confirmed that Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang was invited to the gathering, despite the recent confrontation between Quang and HCMC authorities (ref A). Bao said that his Hanoi counterparts had wanted to exclude Quang and invite only the Mennonite group of Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung that has been registered in HCMC. Bao said that the HCMC CRA interceded and noted that it would be seen as discriminatory if Quang was not invited.

¶5. (SBU) According to Bao, the CRA officials said that the CRA will begin in June to consider the national-level applications of three groups, including the Danang-based United World Mission Church (UWMC). The CRA told the participants that they would "try" to meet the deadline for consideration of applications stipulated in the time frame provided in the March 2005 Implementing Guidelines (60 days for national registration, 90

days for national recognition). Bao noted that the national-level process is only the last step in a registration process that first requires religious groups to register with their local and provincial CRAs before they apply at the national level. Suggesting that different provinces still are applying registration requirements differently, Bao noted that were the UWMC headquartered in HCMC, it would have been registered already. (The UWMC told us that it completed its registration application in September 2005.)

Religious Groups' Reaction

¶6. (SBU) Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, President of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), an umbrella organization for many of HCMC's house churches, acknowledged that the meeting was a positive step in bridging differences between the house church community and the government. Pastor Nhan said that he told the CRA that he was ready to register and to "adhere to Vietnamese law." However, Nhan said the VEF is concerned about "discrepancies" between national-level and local-level registration applications. The fact that local registration requires that each church list its followers remains a non-starter for VEF members. Nhan said he complained publicly about continued local harassment of some house churches and requested that the CRA establish a national hot-line to report local violations of religious freedom. Nhan requested a follow-on meeting between Protestant house church leaders and the Central-level CRA to clarify registration procedures and to discuss other issues such as the hot-line, but received no commitment.

¶7. (SBU) According to Nhan, Pastor Ngyuen Toi, head of the UWMC in Danang was upset that he would have to re-apply for registration using the new forms. However, in May 31 telephone conversation with ConGen staff, Pastor Toi was positive. He said that the Central CRA apologized for the delay in implementing the November 2004 Ordinance of Religion. Pastor Toi was told that the UWMC, along with two small Buddhist

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organizations (not the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam), were "priority cases" for national registration. The Central CRA committed to sending staff to Danang this month to work with the UWMC to supplement its registration/recognition application before submitting it to the Prime Minister for final approval. In the meantime, the CRA instructed the UWMC to complete all local-level registrations. The central-level CRA also committed to notify all provinces where the UWMC has churches to instruct local authorities to process registration applications. The CRA officials told Pastor Toi that he should notify them directly if localities refuse to accept the UWMC application. Pastor Toi told us that the vast majority of local officials accepted UWMC registration applications. Moreover, with the exception of one house church in Dak Lak province, UWMC operations have been not faced harassment. (Per ref B, the UWMC operates 123 congregations serving 26,000 persons throughout central Vietnam, including a large number in the Central Highlands.)

¶8. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien, Head of the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship, expressed a clearer understanding of the registration process than Pastor Nhan. Hien noted that the CRA instructed church groups to begin local registration under the Prime Minister's February 2005 "Instruction on Protestantism." This requires house churches to apply with the People's Committee at the village level in every jurisdiction in every province the organization operates. Following local registration, each organization must prepare and submit the three new forms that the central-level CRA handed out at the meeting. The central-level CRA will then contact the organization to review the national registration application. Central CRA will grant them national registration after a review of the provincial registrations and the church's national submission. According to Hien, CRA officials told him that they "aim" to complete registration for all unrecognized groups within two years. Pastor Hien said that he is going to instruct

his churches to start the local registration process. Despite GVN pressure to register jointly, the five Baptist denominations under the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship likely will apply for registration separately.

¶9. (SBU) Nguyen Dinh Thoa of the HCMC BahHai Church told us that he and six other members of the Baha'i "legalization committee" attended the briefing. They confirmed that CRA officials apologized for the late introduction of the implementation guidelines to unrecognized groups and announced that the implementation officially had commenced. Although the Baha'i were not one of the three named "priority cases for national registration," Thoa told us that the Baha'i have been instructed orally to file for central level registration and recognition immediately. The Baha'i church is planning to submit its application on June 20.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The Central-level CRA's initiative to open formal discussions with unregistered religious organizations is a welcome and needed step, albeit overdue; the HCMC CRA has told us that it had been lobbying its Hanoi counterparts for nearly a year in this regard. It follows on the heels of successful meetings between local and international Baptist representatives in Hanoi and HCMC in May (ref C).

¶11. (SBU) Comment continued. The differing reactions of the Baptists, VEF and UWMC to the meeting is no surprise. Over the past two years, the Baptists and the UWMC have reached out informally to government and Party officials in the provinces and Hanoi and are clear on how to proceed and prepared to do so. In contrast, the VEF is divided between moderates who might consider registration, and hardliners who reject GVN oversight. For example, members of the VEF include Pastor Quang's branch of the Mennonite Church and the Inter-Evangelistic Movement church of Pastor Tran Mai. Both Pastor Mai and Quang were signatories of the "Declaration on Democracy" co-authored by political dissident Do Nam Hai and Father Nguyen Van Ly. Seeking internal consensus, the VEF has not been willing to engage on registration. More consistent and more rapid progress in registration and recognition of the UWMC and Baptists is critical to encouraging fence-sitters in the VEF to register. So too are continued government efforts to minimize the number of harassment incidents against house churches and to resolve those that do occur. End Comment.
Winnick